

Metaphors on the Teaching of Western Management to the East

by

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Management Thought Assignment

30 October 1998

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Use two compelling metaphors to describe the role of Western management teachers, lecturers and gurus teaching management to business leaders of your economies like that of Malaysia. Discuss the implications of these metaphors and evaluate their insights and limitations.

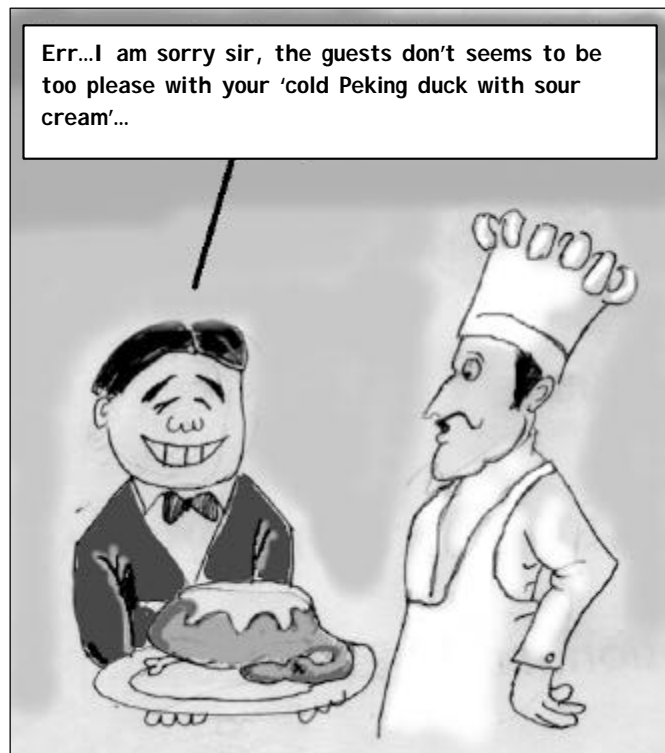
Introduction

Management science as a discipline is itself new and rapidly evolving in Malaysia. Already in the sixties there was an acute awareness of the scarcity of top and middle-level manager in Malaysia. This is due to the need to man the plethora of public and private enterprises that sprung in the wake of independence and the nation's development plans. In 1968, Professor Milton J. Esman of Pittsburg University observed that Malaysia's chronic under supply of trained managers and management know-how is and will continue to be a drag on the nation's development (1). Over the past few years the average growth rate of Malaysia has been significant and highly remarkable, suggesting the need of more trained managers gearing towards our vision of becoming a fully developed nation by year 2020. However, the question is how significant is the education of management science being taught by western academicians to our Eastern business leaders? This paper aims at using two metaphors to describe the above subject, highlighting the cultural and role differences.

“French chef for a Chinese banquet”

The French are considered by many to have the best chef in the world. Many talented world class chef originated from this region, capable of performing creative wonders with a variety of food. Nevertheless, how well would a top class French chef fares in preparing a Chinese banquet dinner for the Chinese? Perhaps he may not be able to fully comprehend the local taste. In general, the Chinese eat less meat than the west. Vegetables and even many fruits are cooked in most Chinese kitchen instead of being served raw, in contrast to the West. The Chinese are unlikely to adopt frying in butter, because they have a cultural aversion to dairy products. Even the method of cooking varies greatly whereby Chinese prefers stir frying, steaming and using the wok as compares to roasting, baking and grilling.

This first metaphor emphasizes the cultural differences between the west and east. In a comprehensive study of more than 11,000 articles published in 24 management journals over a ten year period revealed that approximately 80% of the studies were done in United States and had been conducted by Americans (3). Follow up studies continues to confirm the lack of cross-cultural considerations in management research. Failure to understand of these cross-cultural differences will lead western academicians to teach the same



management approaches as they used in their home countries and not adjust to the local norms and practices.

Firstly, according to Edward T.Hall, who has made studies on the effects of culture on business, there is a distinction between high- and low context cultures (4). Asians fall into the high context cultures whereby, context is at least as important as what is actually said. The speakers and the listener rely on a common understanding of the context. In low-context culture such as North America, however, most of the information is contained explicitly in the words. For example, in United State, criticism is more direct and recorded formally, whereas in Asian it is more subtle and verbal. What is not being said can carry more meaning than what is said.

Secondly, values differ across culture. A research by Geert Hofstede, (5) has found great differences in preferences of values among similar people in different nation. For instance most Asian scores high in collectivism, which means that every individual belongs to one or more closely knit in-group. On the other hand, the United States ranked highest among all individual survey on individualism, which means that links between individual are loose. An understanding of these differences are necessary, for example to explain why Asian prefer and perform better in standardized tasks, as part of a work team, with group based decisions and rewards.

Cultural differences can have significant influence on decision making. For example Asian managers' method of decision making is more group oriented than in United States. The Asians value conformity and cooperation. Therefore before making an important decision, they collect a large amount of information, which is then used in consensus-forming group decisions.

Just like a French chef trying to understand working in a Chinese kitchen, interaction between different culture requires the understanding of various aspects such as differences in concept of time, interpretation of gestures and social norms. Little things do make a difference. In Malaysia if you are invited to a friend's ten course Chinese banquet to celebrate his wedding, the invitation card will inevitably state 7.00p.m but dinner wouldn't start until 9.15pm. In most Western countries, scratching the head is interpreted as lack of comprehension but to the Singaporeans, it indicates forgetfulness. Japanese men scratch their heads to symbolize anger. In predominantly Asian Buddhist countries like Burma and Thailand, one must resist the temptation to slap mosquitoes or snub out ants – you might be killing somebody's reincarnated relatives!

LIMITATIONS

An argument about the metaphor is that, we treat the Asian's culture as static entities, which is incorrect. Globalization, the foreign media, exposures to multinational corporations, overseas higher education, are all moving and changing the Asian culture rapidly, even to the extend of increasing our adaptability to western culture. On the other hand old values may not disappear overnight and may often survive in new settings. New Asian generation may be less collectivist than the older generations, but compared to the west, they will still be much more collectivist.

Also no doubt that there are differences between the East and the West cultures but most management theory work quite effectively globally. After all most modern Asian managers speak English and have the benefit of training and experience in modern management. Besides certain Asian values like hard work and thrift, which are often emphasized, may not be so particularly Asian after all. They can be counted as Christian's principles or argued as what seemed natural to poor and peasant communities everywhere.

“The composer and the musician”

The second metaphor is aimed to highlight the differences in the role as an academician compared to a manager. It shows the common subjects of both the composer and the musician, which in music (as compared to the subject management science for academicians and managers). Even though both works on

the same subjects, they differ in their work scope, their contributions, objectives and method of work. A composer requires inspirations to compose songs, which is then passed on to the musicians to play and fine-tune the music on his instrument. Similarly academics gurus such as business schools professor and others who have an educational institution affiliation generate management ideas and managers apply them. However contrary to this point they were also arguments that many academicians have failed to address, let alone meet the management needs (6).

A composer requires a talent for music, inspiration and creativity to compose a song, often having to rewrite and fine tune his musical scores. The musician on the other hand plays according to the chords, often going into a “jamming” session and play by ear. This is similar to academics that need to take precaution, not to make mistake, making thorough research. A good manager can’t operate that way, as they often need to make decision while under risk and uncertainty just like playing music by ear. Obviously a manager too has to be responsible for gathering as many relevant facts as possible. But at some point he have to take the leap of faith. First, because even the right decision is wrong if it is made too late. Second, because in most cases there are not such thing as certainty.

Working manager who often have difficulty understanding excessively technical language will tend to rely more on intuitive reasoning. Academicians on the other hand, need ample facts and a collection of empirical results to conclude a theory. In real life, one hardly has the luxury of time. As quoted by Iacocca (11), the problem with those with too much education is that they were taught not to take any action until they have got all the facts. They may have ninety-five percent of them but its going to take another six months to get the last five- percent. And by the time they do, the facts will be out of date because the market has moved on them. The crucial thing is – timing.

A musician has higher needs for human interactions than the composer. In concerts, it is the musicians who perform in front of the crowds of thousands. Composer plays an important role but are often behind the stage. Likewise, managers get things done through people. They make decisions allocate resources, and direct activities of others to attain goals. These diverse roles need both human skills and technical skills. Fred Luthans and his associates studied more than 450 managers and found that all his subjects are engaged in four managerial activities including: traditional management, communication, human resource management and networking (7). It was found that networking was the single greatest reason to the success of a manager. In contrast we would presumably see technical proficiently playing a greater role in the success of an academicians.

Lastly just as a musician value skills whereas a composer value creativity, there are great differences in the value systems of both an academicians and managers. An academician wants understanding and a manager prefers accomplishment. Academicians will attempt to find data for explaining the problems under study in terms of an acceptable, conceptual framework. In contrast managers are concerned with short-term actions which will eliminate the specific pressing problems. Effective managers tend to be more interested in solutions than an explanation. An academician wants understanding and validity while a manager prefers accomplishment and effectiveness.

LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of the metaphor is the similarity in the ultimate goals. A composer and a musician may normally belong to the same record company or organization, working hand in hand to the common goals, to produce quality songs for example. In contrast, academicians and managers work in separate distinct organization, doing different form of work to support different organizational goals. Also academicians must rely on the studies of others to support his work while composer must emphasize on originality and creativity.

Conclusions

While it is true that communication technology and the ease of international travel has made the world smaller, our understanding of different cultures has not kept up. Management is something done by people to people. It is a human rather than a technical process. If the people are different, management will be done differently. Peter Drucker claims that all previous assumptions upon which management practice has been based for the last fifty years are obsolete. New assumptions about the human nature, the work environment and management practice itself are needed to meet ongoing rapid changes. These new assumptions are almost all culture-based. The most complicated problems then is the fact that one cannot learn culture – one has to live it. Furthermore, due to the role disparities, there may be certain academic solutions, which are not practical in real life. By looking at the different context in which academics and managers work, their different reward systems and their different perspective on the same issues, we can set our judgment to the appropriateness of academic solutions to managerial needs. Finally, I would like to conclude the paper with a sayings from Chinese Philosopher Chuang Tzu, which very well describe the complexities and intricacies of an Western academicians teaching an Eastern manager.

“How can I talk of the sea of to the frog when it has never left its pond? How can I talk of frost to the birds of the summer, when they have never left their place of origin? How can I talked to the sage when he is the origin of his own doctrine?” – Chinese Philosopher Chuang Tzu.

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